

1989.04 Review of *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*

[*The Men Who Killed Kennedy* is a British (ITV) documentary film directed by Nigel Turner. I wrote this shortly after I interviewed Turner in London in March 1989. Turner's film was finally broadcast in the US in September 1991 on A&E cable, just a couple of months before Stone's JFK opened. I sent a copy of this review to Noam Chomsky, L. Fletcher Prouty, and Oliver Stone. All three replied. Stone said he was working on three films and could not pursue the matter. Chomsky's and Prouty's replies began a correspondence with both that lasted almost six years.]

In view of the lukewarm reception given to several television documentaries last November on the assassination of President Kennedy, it is astonishing that the best film on the subject has not been shown in the United States. *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*, produced by Nigel Turner for British Central Independent Television, was broadcast in England on October 25, 1988, and subsequently in thirty other countries by Christmas—but not in the United States.

What this film, nominated for best documentary by the British Association of Film and Television Arts, reveals about the Kennedy assassination and its aftermath is so spectacular that it is unconscionable to ignore it. It presents key evidence and testimony made public for the first time in 25 years, including an eyewitness who was standing on the grassy knoll, probably a few feet away from the gunman who fired the fatal head shot. The most spectacular revelation, based on the research of American writer Steve Rivele, is nothing less than the names of the probable gunmen (none of whom was Lee Harvey Oswald).

These findings are the result of years of painstaking research, presented soberly and without melodrama. If it smacks of sensationalism, it is only because anything hinting at the truth in this case must sound sensational. If the government has colluded with the press for over 25 years in propagating a fictitious account of what happened in Dallas, which unfortunately seems to be the case, how could the truth sound anything other than sensational?

If the press has not been participating in the cover-up, why do almost all reports on the subject continue to flout the evidence, referring disparagingly to those who do not accept the now thoroughly discredited Warren Commission Report as "conspiratorialists"? The evidence that the assassination was a conspiracy is overwhelming, and has been in for a long time. The majority of the American people believed it in 1966, according to a Louis Harris poll of that year, and even the House Assassinations Committee was finally forced to conclude in 1979 that there had to have been more than one gunman (i.e. a conspiracy).

How is it possible, then, in 1988, for otherwise respectable journalists to mouth such pabulum as "the single-bullet theory, though implausible, remains intact" (Walter Goodman, paraphrasing Walter Cronkite, in the *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1988)? How is it possible that the Abraham Zapruder film of the shooting, which clearly shows Kennedy's head jerked back by a bullet fired from the front, has been kept secret for 25 years, although Time-Life has been in possession of it all this time? How is it possible that Gordon Arnold, the eyewitness on the grassy knoll, who offered to testify years ago, has been totally ignored not only by investigating agencies but also by the press? Above all, why has this superb

documentary, which presents this evidence and testimony, and more, for the first time, been denied an American audience?

I talked about this in London with Turner and his associate producer, Susan Winter. The major American networks have seen the film, of course, and it is being shown privately in the U.S. A well-placed friend of Turner's who had seen the film explained the American networks' curious disinterest this way: "Nigel," he said, "you're shaking the leaves on the trees." No one can see this film without being shaken, but Turner's friend was referring to foliage of monstrous proportions. Two witnesses in the film give us an idea of just how large and pernicious a growth we are dealing with:

Dr. Cyril Wecht, forensic pathologist:

I think it's extremely important for the American people to know that there can be the overthrow of a government, and that there can be a coup d'état, in America, that that in fact did happen through the assassination of President Kennedy.

Col. Fletcher Prouty, Chief of Special Operations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during Kennedy's presidency:

I think without any question it's what we called the use of hired gunmen. And this isn't new. In fact, this little manual here, which is called "the assassination manual for Latin America" [*Clandestine Operations Manual for Central America*, a CIA publication] says that, talking about Latin America, 'if possible, professional criminals will be hired to carry out specific, selective "jobs"—"jobs" in quotes, which means murders. Well, if this manual for Latin America, printed within the last few years, and a government manual, says that, there's no question but what the application of the same techniques was dated back in Kennedy's time—in fact I know that from my own experience, you know, I was in that business in those days. So, with that knowledge, you begin to realize hired criminals, the way this book says, can be hired by anybody in power with sufficient money to pay them, but, more importantly, with sufficient power to operate the cover-up ever after.

Because you see it's one thing to kill somebody; it's another thing to cover up the fact that you did it or that you hired someone to do it. That's more difficult. So they used the device of the Warren Commission to cover up their hired killers. Now, who would hire the killers? And who has the power to put that Warren Commission report out over the top of the whole story? You see, you're dealing with a very high echelon of power. It doesn't necessarily reside in any government. It doesn't necessarily reside in any single corporate institution. But it seems to reside in a blend of the two. Otherwise, how could you have gotten people like the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court to participate in the cover-up, the police in Dallas to participate in the cover-up, etc.—and the media, all the media, not just one or two newspapers, but none of them will print the story that other than Oswald killed the President with three bullets—something that's absolutely untrue.

It must be remembered that the first hints at Mafia involvement in the assassination came from Europe. French journalists had suggested a Mob conspiracy as early as December, 1963, a suggestion which was reiterated by Thomas Buchanan in the 1964 British edition of his *Who Killed Kennedy?* But as David Scheim points out in *Contract on America: The Mafia*

Murder of President John F. Kennedy (sold in England under the title *The Mafia Killed President Kennedy*), the American edition of Buchanan's book was censored to remove all references to organized crime. The fact that Turner's team was able to get witnesses to speak out who had kept silent for 25 years has a lot to do with their being British. Money, at least, was not a factor; no fees were paid for the interviews, and some witnesses had refused lucrative offers from American journalists.

To understand this, we must remember that these eyewitnesses know the truth. More to the point, they know that the truth has been systematically suppressed by their own governmental agencies and the press. It is not only the fear, as one comments in the film, of becoming one of those witnesses who committed "suicide" by shooting themselves in the back. They have been profoundly and tragically isolated, knowing from first-hand experience that the government and the press cannot be trusted. The fact that Turner was offering them a chance to be heard *outside* the United States is what gave them the courage to finally speak out. These are not kooks or publicity hounds, but ordinary Americans who have been caught and almost lost in a web of violence and duplicity so finely meshed that they have had nowhere to turn. Their testimony under these circumstances is an act of both physical and moral courage.

Turner, a free-lancer, was still at Oxford when Kennedy was killed. He came to the assignment to do a documentary for the 25th anniversary of the assassination four years ago, with no reason to doubt the Warren Report. Three years of research, including a year in Dallas, and over 300 interviews changed that.

I had the impression that this scholarly-looking Englishman, with sensitive features and an unassuming manner, who admires much about the United States (there are still some Europeans who do), had stumbled onto an America which he had not set out to find, and which saddened him profoundly. As an American, I am also sad, but more than that, I am angry.

Who cannot be incensed, for example, when we learn from eyewitness accounts, after 25 years, that the casket Kennedy's body left Dallas in was not the same one that was opened for the autopsy in Washington, and that although the physicians in Dallas found only 25% of the brain tissue missing due to the wound, there was no brain matter at all in the skull when it was examined again in Washington? This means that essential information about the bullet and its trajectory disappeared forever. How can we swallow the fact that key evidence confiscated by the FBI simply disappeared? There was physical evidence of a missed shot that hit a curbstone and slightly injured a bystander, but the supposedly inconclusive spectrographic analysis of the stone was destroyed for lack of space—1/32 inch in one of the largest archives in the world! There was an amateur film taken by a bystander as the motorcade passed between her and the grassy knoll: if anyone had fired from the knoll, as this woman and more than fifty other eyewitnesses testified, the gunmen would be visible in the film. This film was dutifully handed over to the FBI immediately after the assassination—and never heard of again.

We also see in *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*, astonishingly enough, also for the first time, not only the Zapruder footage, showing the impact of a bullet fired from the front, but also the official autopsy photos. These photos show a tiny entrance wound in the back of the skull, in exactly the position where the examining physicians in Dallas describe a massive exit

wound. It is obvious, as Robert Groden points out, why the Warren Commission refused even to look at the photos, and why the House Assassinations Committee, though it looked at them, refused to show them to the Dallas doctors: they had been faked. What's more, it would have become obvious that they were faked by someone in the United States Government, because no one else had access to them.

At the end of the film, we are told the names of the probable hit men, the men behind the contract, and the underworld sources of this information. All of the principals, according to Steve Rivele, who spent five years investigating the case, had CIA connections at some point in their careers. Rivele believes that the CIA felt so "compromised" by these circumstances that the cover-up became necessary. This is a relatively innocuous explanation of the CIA's role in the affair.

Of the three men Rivele claims were the assassins, two are still alive. One of these is at large on outstanding drug charges; the other lives in Marseille. Not surprisingly, all three have alibis for the time of the assassination. It would be much more surprising if anyone involved in a conspiracy on this scale did not have a good alibi. What is surprising is the willingness of the authorities and the press to dismiss Rivele's allegations so easily. The FBI has long since been informed, but no one has been apprehended, even for questioning. The reaction of the press, in this case the European press, since the film has not even been shown in the U.S., is typified by Pierre Salinger, writing in the *International Herald Tribune* (Nov. 2, 1988):

We now know that two of them were nowhere near the scene of the crime. One was aboard a French minesweeper in the harbor of Toulon (as verified by the Defense Ministry in Paris). The second was in prison in Marseille (as the Justice Ministry confirmed). The third man, a French newspaper has established, was on sick leave from his job in Marseille as a docker, having lost an eye. Is it possible to believe that such a man was recruited to kill the American president?

A more interesting question is: Is it possible to believe the former press secretary to President Kennedy is so naive? Can such a man sincerely believe that a newspaper report "establishes" anything, that the statement of the one of the accused or medical certificates produced by the daughter of another of the accused are credible, that 25-year-old government records cannot be manipulated, in a case where the official autopsy photos of the President of the United States were probably faked?

The strangest thing about Salinger's article is what it doesn't say. He mentions nothing about the evidence in the film of a cover-up, which is much more important than the question of who fired the shots. Is it possible that a man as close to Kennedy as Salinger was is not affected by the news (if it is news) that the president's corpse was manipulated and the autopsy photos faked? Is it possible that a journalist has no curiosity as to why Time-Life kept the Zapruder film under lock and key for 25 years? Is it possible that the former Kennedy press secretary is unaffected by the suggestion of the former Kennedy Chief of Special Operations (Col. Prouty) that the assassination and cover-up were both part of an egregious conspiracy that continues today?

Because of Salinger's special position in this history, as one close both to Kennedy and to the establishment press, it is particularly interesting to note that he, too, continues to make

light of "conspiracy theories," in spite of the evidence. The title of his article is "The Conspiracy Theories Come—and Go." His resumé:

But over the years, and with the plot mentality that grew out of the Watergate affair and the congressional investigations of the CIA in the 1970s, some Americans moved to the European view—yes, there was a conspiracy.

This is a distortion of even the officially acknowledged view, as stated ten years ago in the House Assassinations Committee Report (p. 95):

The committee believes, on the basis of the evidence available to it, that President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy.

Yes, there was a conspiracy. Why does the press seem determined to make us believe otherwise?

Another interesting press reaction to *The Men Who Killed Kennedy* was a widely quoted statement by another American, G. Robert Blakey, who was chief counsel to the House Assassinations Committee:

The central part of this thesis, that is to say that the president was hit from the front right, is just simply medically not true.

This is a very curious statement. One wonders what medical evidence Blakey can be relying on, since we are told in the film that Kennedy's brain was removed before the autopsy and the autopsy photos faked. Dr. Wecht also tells us that no forensic examination of the few bullet fragments that remained were ever made, which might have proved (or not) that they were fired from the same gun. The point is that the "medical evidence" was either missing or had been falsified, a point which Blakey's remark misses entirely. One cannot help wondering if he saw the film at all, or if was quoted correctly. Things become even more confused when, for example, the *Birmingham Post* (Oct. 27) continues as follows:

He [Blakey] said medical evidence presented by the Select House of Representatives Committee on Assassination in 1979 showed President Kennedy was hit only by bullets fired from behind by Lee Harvey Oswald.

We now have the clear impression that both Blakey and the Committee do not believe there was a conspiracy—an impression which is absolutely false. Can this be the Blakey who said, in a *Newsweek* interview in 1979 (July 30, p. 38):

I am now firmly of the opinion that the Mob did it. It is a historical truth.

Can this be the same Committee which said on page 1 of their report:

Scientific acoustical evidence establishes a high degree of probability that two gunmen fired at President John F. Kennedy.

Whether this kind of distortion is intended or not, it is very convenient for those who would still have us believe the fairy tale of the Warren Commission Report, which, in the words of Dr. Wecht, "should be taken from the non-fiction shelves of all the libraries and placed with Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer, and Gulliver's Travels." Whether in that case even poetic justice would be done is questionable.

Against this background, the authentic news footage we see again in *The Men Who Killed Kennedy* of Oswald and Ruby themselves takes on a different hue. Oswald shows genuine surprise when he is told by a reporter that he has been charged with shooting the president, which is quite understandable, if he was a patsy. Ruby, in a BBC television interview, says:

Everything pertaining to what's happening has never come to the surface. The world will never know the true facts of what occurred, my motives.

In response to the question, "Do you think it'll ever come out," he answers:

No, because unfortunately the people [who] had so much to gain, and had such an ulterior motive to put me in the position I'm in, will never let the true facts come aboveboard to the world.

And in response to the question, "Are these people in very high positions," the answer is:

Yes.

It is easy to question Ruby's credibility, but everything points to the truth of these statements. He is saying essentially the same thing that Wecht and Prouty say in the film, and these are very credible men who know from experience what they are talking about. The blend of power that Prouty refers to in the earlier quote would not be simply a matter of a few Mafia chieftains and a corrupt official or two. It would be a blend of criminal, political, and corporate interests amounting to a conspiracy of mammoth proportions, which did not end with the murder of John Kennedy. If these forces are diabolical and powerful enough to assassinate a president and get away with it, many more questions about the course of political events since 1963 must be answered. John Kennedy's assassination is not the only one which has been inadequately investigated (to say the least), and as David Scheim argues in *Contract on America*, the web of interests linking organized crime—which by now is often indistinguishable from "legitimate" capitalist greed—with anti-communism, with the CIA, with ghetto politics, with drugs and the munitions industry, with Cuba and Latin America, with Vietnam and God knows what else, is one that reaches right up to the White House of today.

We tend to forget, and we are not often reminded, that Kennedy's foreign and domestic policy initiatives were inimical not only to organized crime but to big money in general and a number of other interests. He alienated the CIA and the Mafia (for whom pre-Castro Cuba was a major source of income from gambling and prostitution) by refusing air support for the Bay of Pigs invasion and subsequently discouraging further anti-Castro activities. General recollection has it that Kennedy "stood tall" before the Russians in the Cuban missile crisis, but the fact is that he averted war by agreeing not to invade Cuba if Russia removed the missiles. He alienated a broad spectrum of right-wing extremists by pioneering civil rights and acknowledging the leadership of Martin Luther King. He alienated the arms industry by proposing, in agreement with Krushchev, major long-range cuts in defense spending, and the oil industry by demanding cuts in the oil depletion allowance. General recollection also has it that Kennedy got us involved in Vietnam, but in fact he had already ordered the first withdrawal of troops when he was killed, and had planned major withdrawals by 1965.

If we look at the course of events since 1963 with what Salinger might call a "plot mentality," a number of things begin to make horrible sense. First of all, there were the assassinations of Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X, none of which have been properly

investigated. For example, thousands of documents pertaining to the RFK case were kept secret by the state of California for twenty years, despite numerous appeals for their release. When the files were finally released, in April, 1988, it was learned that 2,410 police photographs had been burned in 1968, and that the Los Angeles police had also destroyed important physical evidence (The New York Times, April 21, 1988). If we look beyond the quagmire that surrounds all four assassinations (not to mention the murders of numerous witnesses and investigators), what binds them together is that they effectively decapitated the civil rights movement. In the 1960s, civil rights activism, coupled with the powerful religious leadership of King and Malcolm X, represented a virulent threat to the life blood of those who profit from the crime that is bred by poverty and social injustice. The Mafia needs the ghetto and the slum, where their "businesses" (drugs, prostitution, gambling) flourish and where they recruit their soldiers. Making good Christians (or Black Muslims) out of poor people means draining the bank accounts of the crooks.

Secondly, Kennedy's developing foreign policy of accommodation with communism was reversed. Cuba was already a lost cause, but at the same time a perfect excuse for continuing the holy wars against the red peril in virtually every country in Latin America and in southeast Asia. Anti-communism is the ideological banner under which these wars are fought—whether directly or by proxy or covert action—but the non-ideological and unscrupulous force of greed plays a greater role than most of us know. It is a fact that wars make certain people richer in a hurry. In addition to the "legitimate" spur to certain sectors of the economy that any war provides, fighting communism—however sincerely people may believe in this—also protects the interests of organized crime. It is a fact that southeast Asia and Latin America are the world's major sources of opium. And it is a fact that communist countries do not cooperate in international drug-trafficking.

The third way that things have changed since 1963 is in the character and spirit of presidential leadership itself. The question is whether this dearth of inspiration, not to mention charisma, in the White House is accidental. America is full of people with brilliant leadership potential: why don't they get near the White House? The Kennedys were hardly perfect, but they did move people in a way that none of our politicians have since. If there has been a conspiracy to *suppress* exactly this kind of leadership, it has been eminently served, wittingly or not, by Kennedy's successors. Johnson and Nixon pursued the Vietnam War until it brought the country to the verge of revolution, as the anti-war movement began to include large numbers of veterans and others who could no longer be dismissed as radicals, "effete intellectual snobs" (as Spiro Agnew infamously put it), or tools of the international communist conspiracy. Drug-trafficking and the arms industry have flourished, channeling billions of dollars into areas of the economy of dubious value to the welfare of the nation. There has been no continuation of John and Robert Kennedy's campaign against organized crime. We had a Warren Commission of questionable integrity, and a former member of that commission (Ford) who, on becoming president, pardoned his former boss (Nixon), whose integrity was so questionable that he was run out of office. We have had eight years of a president (Reagan) who seemed a mere caricature of leadership—the very image of a puppet.

And now, another aspect of Kennedy's presidency has been reversed. We have gone from a president antagonistic to the CIA to one who directed it (1976-1977). We know that the CIA has covertly and violently manipulated political events around the world, and there is reason to suspect that it was involved in the events of the 1960s which radically changed the

political course of our own country. Given what we know, and what we further suspect, about the CIA, is it not curious that the former head of this agency turns up in the White House? We do not wonder when the head of the KGB (Andropov) accedes to the highest office in the Soviet Union; after all, that is not a free country. But how can we not wonder when the analogous situation occurs here as the result of a supposedly democratic electoral process? If we assume the worst, that the assassination of Kennedy was a coup d'état engineered by the CIA (in conjunction with even more anonymous forces), as Dr. Wecht and Col. Prouty suggest, everything that has happened since then also makes sense, up to and including the fact that the former boss of the CIA, Kennedy's anathema, is now sitting in the oval office. If this is nonsense, and I hope it is, no one is in a better position to clarify matters than George Bush. And why should we not expect him to do so? National security? Just how much secrecy can a country tolerate, in the name of national security or anything else, and still call itself free?

On Nov. 25, three days after the assassination and the day after Ruby silenced Oswald, Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach wrote the following memo to Bill Moyers:

The world must be satisfied that Oswald was the assassin; that he did not have confederates who are still at large; and that the evidence was such that he would have been convicted at trial.

One must conclude that the government and the media have done their best to adhere to this line for the past 25 years, and that the non-appearance of *The Men Who Killed Kennedy* on any American television station, after enthralling audiences in 30 other countries, is just another example of the cover-up. It may be true, as Walter Goodman writes about the documentaries that were shown on American television, that the Kennedy case "will continue to produce inconclusive exposés for at least another quarter-century" (*New York Times*, Nov. 1, 1988). Not a bad estimate, since by 2013 most of the principals will be dead. (Salinger predicts another 100 years.) But the Turner film is anything but "inconclusive"; it is a strong yank at what looks like a hideous web of lies and murder at the highest levels of power, and if the American people get hold of it, it might just come unraveled. If they don't, the idea that the United States is a free country with a free press and a public with a right to know will someday be revealed as the biggest lie of all.

